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SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: Spring Road Woes Further Isolate Ferghana Valley

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (U) Summary: Poloff made an overland trip to the Ferghana Valley on March 20-22 and encountered poor road conditions on the only link between Tashkent Province and the three populous provinces on the other side of a high mountain range. The poor conditions may be a temporary result of heavy winter snows, but the tough travel conditions underscore the isolation that many Ferghana residents feel from the rest of the country. While limited linkages keeps Ferghana off the major tourist routes and limits economic development, residents were in a relaxed mood on the Navruz holiday as they celebrated the end of a mild winter. End summary.

¶2. (U) Poloff traveled overland to the Ferghana Valley on March 20 - 22 on a personal trip. The 330-kilometer journey from Tashkent to Fergana City takes about five hours, but the vast majority of the distance is quickly traversed on good or excellent roads. A stretch of about 30 kilometers through the Kamchik mountain pass is in terrible condition following winter snow falls and slows the journey substantially. Poloff had the benefit of an American-made light SUV with which to navigate potholes, gravel surfaces, and deteriorating asphalt, but most Uzbeks make the journey in the ubiquitous UzDaewoo vehicles in varying states of repair, giving the busy Kamchik road the feel of a rally race as drivers maneuver wherever they think the bumps will be the least damaging. A sedan which convoyed with poloff required tire repairs in Kokand, the first major city in the Ferghana Valley side of the pass.

¶3. (U) Interestingly, the road seemed to be in decent condition last summer and in autumn 2007 when poloff covered the same ground, which suggests that the mountain snows regularly wreak havoc on the highway during winter. There were sporadic repair crews working even on a holiday weekend, but they were only half-heartedly shoveling blacktop into gaping holes as a stopgap measure rather than undertaking serious road improvement projects. There were far more police and soldiers manning various checkpoints and guarding key infrastructure than there were construction workers, which underlies the strategic importance of the road linking the populous Ferghana Valley with the capital and the majority of the country's territory to the west. Thus, one-third of the population depends on this single thoroughfare to access Tashkent province. For perspective, there are more Uzbek citizens living in the Ferghana Valley than the entire populations of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, or Tajikistan.

¶4. (SBU) It is not just mountains that restrict access to the valley, as the jagged borders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan all limit commerce and transportation; hence, this stretch of route A-373 takes on even more importance for Uzbeks. In both directions, poloff observed convoys of gas and oil trucks with police escorts in front and behind snaking their way through the Kamchik pass. Border guards with machine guns stand at attention in front of and inside two key tunnels which form the pass, and prominent signs admonish motorists not to snap photographs along the route, which includes scenic 10,000-foot snowcapped peaks. Traffic checkpoints, which are omnipresent throughout Uzbekistan at township and provincial borders, are more thorough here, with Border Guards checking passports and opening car trunks for inspection, which causes further delays and hassles for the average Uzbek but just polite salutes for passing diplomats (but poloff overheard authorities sending radio reports noting his diplomatic plate number and the time of crossing). The layers of security as well as the dramatic geography give a traveler the feeling of crossing into a different country.

¶5. (SBU) Inside the valley at the Yodgorlik (Souvenir) Silk Factory in Margilon -- one of the few bona fide tourist attractions in the Ferghana Valley -- staff proudly explained to poloff that the workshop helps keep original craft techniques alive and provides employment for 460 people -- a majority women -- involved in harvesting cocoons, making bright fabrics, and weaving carpets and scarves. The entrepreneurial spirit was alive and well, as staff -- alerted by the calls of helpful soccer-playing youths on the street -- rushed to meet the visiting vehicles despite the fact it was an important holiday weekend at closing time. Yet the director, who also traveled from Tashkent the same day, commisserated with poloff about the poor road conditions on the pass and lamented how hard it is for tourists to reach key points within the Ferghana Valley. He said the poor road conditions are typical despite frequent reconstruction efforts, which he attributed to poor quality and misguided repair efforts.

¶6. (SBU) Further south near Rishtan -- famous in Uzbekistan for its distinctive ceramics -- poloff visited another tourist attraction at the Rishtan Ceramic Museum and Workshop. Local icon and master Rustam Usmanov was happy to receive visitors on the Navruz holiday and in fact had work crews busily working on a renovation project to upgrade appearances. He noted that only five to ten percent of his business came from direct visits, and he relies instead on displaying his products on consignment with third parties on the more accessible and

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well-traveled tourist route between Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and -- to a lesser extent -- Khiva. He, too, noted how difficult the journey is over the pass and acknowledged that the limited transport links isolate the entire Valley. As with the silk workshop, a large portion of ceramic sales are for the Uzbek domestic market, which many producers in Rishtan cater to. The number of skilled craftsmen in the area is high because there was a Soviet-era factory that closed in the perestroika era, when Usmanov and others lost their jobs but got into the business for themselves.

¶7. (U) Navruz is an important holiday in Uzbekistan and considered the official kickoff to spring, when Central Asians breathe a sigh of relief that they made it through the winter, in this case a mild one.

Poloff passed through numerous towns and cities in Ferghana province, and the mood was festive as locals packed bazaars, attended carnivals, and wore glittering national costumes. In many ways the Ferghana Valley feels more like China and South Asia than other parts of Uzbekistan -- bicycles are much more prevalent, dress among men and women tends to be more conservative (many more men in the valley still wear the traditional black Uzbek "doppa" hat and blue "chappon" robes than elsewhere), and even "tuk-tuk" motorcycles with enclosed compartments are a common sight (but almost unseen in the rest of Uzbekistan). Rural people were also working hard tending to fields and livestock, even on a holiday, evidence that life is hard for many.

Comment:

¶ 8. (U) It is surprising that there is an excellent four-lane divided highway leading from Tashkent to the mountains as well as an extensive network of decent highways criss-crossing the populous Ferghana Valley, yet a short stretch of poor quality road on the mountain pass reinforces a sense of isolation. The most likely explanation is that repairs are done on the cheap and need consistent preventative maintenance that authorities just do not have the budget or willpower to complete. For tourists, the Ferghana Valley remains off the beaten path due to the arduous journey, limited support infrastructure, and relative lack of marquee attractions compared to other destinations in the country. The countryside was in a relaxed, festive mood -- at least for the Navruz holiday -- and there seemed to be no signs of any restlessness or discontent. While the Ferghana Valley is known to be more fervently Islamic than other parts of Uzbekistan, there likewise were no visible indications of religious upheaval.

NORLAND